

Developing Sociolinguistic Competence Through Aural/Oral Communication Course Activities

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Abstract

High school graduates come into university with fairly high levels of grammatical competence, but often with correspondingly low levels of sociolinguistic competence in terms of foreign language proficiency. For many, English appears to be learned as a school subject rather than as a language that is a strong part of many cultures. An emphasis on learning language as decontextualized knowledge, as a formal system, seems to take academic precedence.

This paper proposes activities that aim to raise students' awareness of language and the functions of a foreign language. It also aims to foster an appreciation for language and its origins. Three activities are introduced in which students attempt to explain etymologies, distinguish between different dialects, and decipher news material whose comprehension relies heavily on reader cultural literacy.

Through examination of these activities, essentially three objectives are served: 1. To deepen understanding of foreign language and its roots; 2. To understand differences among different types of English; 3. To stimulate further interest in language itself, not only foreign language.

Key words and terms: cultural literacy, content-based teaching, etymology, sociolinguistic competence, aural/oral communication, Course of Study for Foreign Languages, Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs)

OVERVIEW

"Where's your brother?" asks an inquisitive aunt of her ten year old niece.

"Up the river!" replies the young girl. The aunt frowns and shakes her head. "Up the river!" she fumes and walks away.

If you were to read this in isolated form, you might think that "*up the river*" refers to one who is

rebellious, or one who prefers to take his own road in life rather than follow others. Why? *Up the river* provides us with a mental picture of one struggling against a current, or one refusing to move with a current. It might give us an image of social non-conformity, of someone bucking a trend.

Logic, however, does not always prevail with colloquialisms and slang phrases; nor does a literal interpretation of words. Sometimes, such phrases are grounded in cultural knowledge. Comprehension of such phrases may require that we be culturally literate. Note that while few Americans know the origin of this phrase, it is fair to say that they have come to understand its meaning from repeated usage.

If you knew, however, that Ossining State Penitentiary (a prison located along the Hudson River, just north of Manhattan) existed, you might be able to deduce that the phrase *up the river* means to send a criminal from the courts in Manhattan *up the river* to Ossining to serve a prison sentence. Hence, the local term, *up the river* has gained widespread meaning for, "gone to prison".

CORRECT ENGLISH..... WHICH ONE?

Another dilemma exists for instructors trying to teach "correct" English. In 1995, an Australian teacher, hired as an assistant language teacher, was dispatched to a high school in Hyogo Prefecture, where he was to "help out in the classes by assisting the teachers of Japanese with their lesson plans". After his first visit to the school, during which time he met his new colleagues and saw some of the facilities, the head instructor took him aside. She said that she was happy to have him at the school, and then handed him a stack of cassettes and books. "Here," she said quite plainly, "take these home and brush up on your English. It isn't American enough."

The young Australian man was taken aback; he had been hired as a native speaker of English, but the teacher was implying that American English is the standard that all instructors-regardless of nationality- should strive to teach.

This brings up the issue of textbooks which may appear, particularly in the eyes of teachers coming from Commonwealth countries, overly American in content and presentation. Many say that they feel odd reading passages that do not sound natural to them. They do not seem natural because they are not British in nature; they are America.

Frances Trollope commented in her 1832 work *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, "I very seldom, during my whole stay in the country, heard a sentence elegantly turned and correctly pronounced from the lips of an American. There is something either in the expression or the accent that jars the feelings and shocks the taste." George Bernard Shaw uttered the famous adage, "*America and Britain are two countries separated by the same language.*" Oscar Wilde once quipped, "*We and the Americans have much in common, but there is still the language barrier.*"

Indeed, teachers of English in Japan need to embrace all forms of language. Students learning Britishisms are not learning incorrectly; *colour* is no more wrong than *color*. *I am taking a kip* may not make immediate sense to a Japanese learner of English (whereas *I am taking a nap* might make sense), but it is English that is in use, as it is correct English in certain regions of this vast world.

In the insightful article *English as a Global Tongue* (Marques de Tamaron), a frightening

statistic is cited: By the year 2100, 90% of the globe's 6000 minor languages will vanish. At the same time, John Steinbeck, not 34 years ago, wrote in *Travels with Charley* that, *"It seems to me that regional speech is in the process of disappearing, not gone but going. Forty years of radio and twenty years of television must have this impact. Communications must destroy localness, by a slow, inevitable process. I can remember a time when I could almost pinpoint a man's place of origin by his speech. That is growing more difficult now and will in some foreseeable future become impossible."*

In this sense, English teachers in Japan have a choice. They can teach students to accept the linguistic multitudes, embrace the differences rather than shun them, or they can support the impoverishment of standardization.

WHAT IS ENGLISH AND WHY IS IT LEARNED?

A language has a history that is both internal and external. Sounds shift, grammar modifies its rules; events take place, language reacts, it evolves as the result of a "natural process". External change is more closely connected with the speakers of a language. Invaders come and modify vocabulary; foreign contacts allow new vocabulary and idioms to creep into a language.

At the lower secondary level, teachers are encouraged to: *"Develop students' abilities to understand a foreign language and express themselves in it, to foster a positive attitude toward communicating in it, and to deepen interest in language and culture, cultivating basic international understanding."* The language which is identified in the Course of Study is English. No preference is indicated for any particular type of English. American English is not given priority; the King's English is not thought to be the standard by which all others be judged.

At the upper secondary level, to which 95% of compulsory school graduates proceed, the objectives are given as: *"Develop students' abilities to understand a foreign language and express themselves in it, to foster a positive attitude toward communicating in it, and to heighten interest in language and culture, deepening international understanding."*

The main difference lies in "heightening interest" in language and culture. Following three years of English language instruction, students are to continue to learn English while developing a heightened sense of the interrelationship between language and culture. According to the findings of Sapir and Whorf, *"The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality... we see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation."*

Refer to the cartoon appearing in the appendix (Appendix 1, Juppe and Field). In this case, the Briton and the American hear the same sentence uttered, but interpret the sentence in two completely different ways. *I'm mad about my flat* requires a certain pragmatic competence in a language, but it also requires a knowledge of the ethnographical origins of the utterance. In other words, from which cultural perspective did the utterance come? Was it British ('mad' perhaps

meaning 'extremely happy'; *'flat'* perhaps meaning, 'apartment'?), or was it more American (*'mad'* meaning *'angry'*; *'flat'* meaning *'punctured inner tube'*)?

"Pragmalinguistic failure" need not occur only between a native speaker and a non-native speaker of a language; in this instance, both of the participants to the conversation are native speakers. A certain "sociopragmatic" sense might help enlighten students, enable them to better comprehend encoders' messages. It is not the equivalent of communicative competence, nor is it precisely the same as linguistic competence. In the initial example, *My brother is up the river*, one could comprehend this message quite easily with both a firm communicative and linguistic competence. The decoded message, however, would result in a mental picture of somebody's sibling being some distance away along a body of water flowing continuously in a line. This is not the correct message; there is a goal-oriented speech situation in which the speaker is using language in order to produce a particular effect in the mind of the listener.

DEEPENING SOCIOLINGUISTIC COMPETENCE

A student of English need not have achieved total communicative and linguistic competence to be able to start acquiring sociolinguistic competence. A particularly propitious time to begin could occur during the teaching of the Ministry's Aural/Oral Communication courses (started in 1994 to increase students' communicative language skills).

These courses place emphasis on the use of communicative language rather than the acquisition of linguistic competence. Under language-use activities in the Aural/Oral C Course of Study, for example, it is encouraged that activities in speaking and listening be conducted, *"To understand a speaker's intentions, etc. and respond to them appropriately"*, and, *"To express ideas etc. positively in accordance with the given situation and purpose of discussion."*

For Oral Communication courses at the university level (first year), the following objectives were set by the author:

1. To understand media segments.
2. To grasp the main idea of a spoken passage.
3. To converse with native speakers on a variety of everyday topics.
4. To give effective presentations.
5. To respond quickly in impromptu situations.
6. To describe an event in detail.
7. To paraphrase or use circumlocution (i.e., *using more words than necessary to explain something instead of being direct*).
8. To understand a greater number of references in literature and media.
9. To know what language is used for.
10. To think about the culture attached to the language.

In order to achieve objectives number 3, 8, 9, and 10, students will need to deepen their knowledge of the language as it is connected to the culture or other cultures.

DEVELOPING KNOWLEDGE OF AND IN A LANGUAGE

The first exercise to be presented deals with deepening a student's knowledge of vocabulary and its origins. This helps give students a sense of where a language originated and how it developed. In a sense, it lends a relevant history to a tongue. Otto Jespersen, the linguist, postulates that words are created in four basic ways:

1. Words are created by error.
2. Words are adopted.
3. Words are created.
4. Words change in meaning.

To this list, William Bryson adds two:

5. Words are generated through the addition of a prefix/suffix.
6. Words are fused.

(Note that despite the fact that both appear to be sub-divisions of item three in Jespersen's list, they will be included).

WORDS ARE CREATED BY ERROR- 17th century folk etymology (the process by which a word is changed so that it becomes more familiar to people) changed *sperige* into *sparrow grass*, a green vegetable. During that time, *sparrow grass* was a popular vegetable long thought to have aphrodisiac qualities (even though it had nothing to do with sparrows). Eventually, this was corrected to its original Greek, *asparagos*, and asparagus prevailed. Ordering this vegetable 300 years ago, however, would have proven futile. Only *sparrow grass* would have conveyed the wish, unless the order had been taken by a botanist.

WORDS ARE ADOPTED- *Poppycock!* This term is often uttered to mean, "Nonsense!" "Foolish!" Strangely, it is an approved alternative form for expletives such as "*Bullshit!*", and aims to uphold a standard of etiquette. Those who understand the etymology realize what poppycock this assertion is; the term comes from the Dutch word, *pappekak*. This translates as "soft dung". Aside from the connotation the two carry, there is little difference between "soft dung" and "bull shit". However, a language student declaring an assertion to be poppycock might receive a rational explanation affirming the disputed sentence's logic; a language student uttering the latter might receive a fist to the jaw.

WORDS ARE CREATED- *Mein Hund sagt, "Wau! Wau!"* declares a German. Many English speakers, since German is a cognate language, would be able to discern the meaning of this sentence: *Hund* (note that nouns are always capitalized in German) very closely approximates "hound". The barking sound, "Bow, wow!" is similar to "*Wau! Wau!*" (pronounced, "Vow! Vow!").

The Latin term *canis* somehow became *hound*. But what about dog? This is a complete mystery that will likely go unanswered. Somehow, in the 16th century, this new word replaced *hound*. Hence, Elvis Presley's refrain, *You ain't nothin' but a hound dog*, sounds redundant when you think about it. *Hound... dog...?*

WORDS SIMPLY CHANGE IN MEANING- *Manufacture* used to mean, "something made by hand". Today, it has come to mean quite the opposite: it refers to something mass-produced.

In 1950, if you were to stand on a street corner and proclaim, "I am gay!", people around you would likely have smiled and thought you to be acknowledging your good spirits. Today, shouting the same phrase might bring smiles only from those with romantic preferences for those of the same sex.

WORDS ARE CREATED BY ADDING/SUBTRACTING- *Apolitical* refers to an individual who has no interest in politics whatsoever. This entered the language, through the United States, in 1952 during a presidential election. *Deplane* refers to exiting an aircraft.

WORDS ARE FUSED- All Indo-European languages have the capacity to do this, but Germans are probably best noted for this example: *Fernsehsendungsaufnahmungsgerät...* this is one of my favorites. Television-broadcast-receiving-take up-machine... guessed the meaning yet? Much to the disappointment of fused word fans, this term is already out of favor; Germans now use the simpler loan word- with a slight spelling alteration- *Video Rekorder*.

(Translation to English unnecessary).

There are numerous examples from English. *Airport*. *Flowerpot*. *Footwear*. *Landmark*. These are all compounds forming new words.

EXERCISE. *Where did the following terms and expressions come from, and what do they mean?*

1. *Form groups of four students.*
2. *Pick a term. Identify its meaning.*
3. *Explain how you think the meaning came to be.*
4. *Complete as many as possible in 25 minutes.*

yankee, Can you dig it?, Dodgers, That takes the cake!, flea market, poor boy sandwich, to make things hum, He's the spitting image of ..., Mayday!, yuppie, the Big Apple, Texas leaguer, gringo, news, G.I. (as in soldier), Mind your P's and Q's!, and pidgin English.

The above exercise was used in a first year university class. It was not thought that they could answer many of the items, but it was hoped that they would generate creative and perhaps logical explanations for the items.

It got the students thinking about language. It got them generating explanations, however erroneous. It got them discussing terms and phrases; many added new terms to their vocabularies as a result of this exercise.

Some of the results are worth reporting here. Note that all of the following etymological explanations are inaccurate.

UP THE RIVER (explained at the outset). Many thought this would mean a person who is rebellious, who goes against the flow of a river.

THE BIG APPLE- 1. As New York was once the apple growing center of the United States, it bore this name. 2. A gangster named Apple ran most of the crime rackets out of New York. People said that this man, Apple, was bigger than New York itself. 3. A computer company based itself in the city and grew to compete with the likes of IBM (NOTE: the students were likely referring to *Macintosh* models here).

YUPPIE- People who wanted to rise badly in the business world said "Yup!" to anything they were asked.

CAN YOU DIG IT?- A person who is extraordinarily talented at something is able to dig regardless of what lies below the surface (NOTE: Both the etymology and the basic meaning are wrong here).

DODGERS- Los Angeles was the center for Dodge car production in the United States.

FLEA MARKET- Second hand goods are often old, decrepit, and *flea* ridden. Due to the prevalence of these insects, the markets were called *flea markets*.

NEWS- North, East, West, South... the news comes from all directions (NOTE: This is a popularly believed *false* etymology).

G.I.- *Get in*. It was a cheer encouraging soldiers to fight. *Get in!* was eventually shortened to G.I.!

PIDGIN ENGLISH- There was a man whose English was so bad, people concluded that pigeons (not very bright members of our animal kingdom) spoke better than he did.

MAYDAY!- Somewhere in the world, *May Day* (or the first of May) marked a great disaster. Therefore, in honor of this horrible occurrence, "*May Day*" was fused and became a word marking a horrible event, such as a ship sinking.

THAT TAKES THE CAKE!- A person is quite clever at getting into some place and out again quickly. They are so adroit, in fact, that they can steal cakes and get out without being noticed.

HE'S THE SPITTING IMAGE OF (so and so)- By spitting on something and cleaning it up, the image looked more like it was originally supposed to. This term, according to the students, originated in a region experiencing a severe shortage of water.

Granted, many of these etymologies are far-fetched and illogical. But still, they show the students' ability to apply the processes by which words are added. By their reckoning, such misunderstandings would occur in actual conversations:

ED: Sales are down again. I guess I'll go out of business.

BILL: Well, there's always the Big Apple!

(INTERPRETATION: Ed will turn to a life of crime under the mafia boss, Mr. Apple.) In fact, Ed will move to New York City.

FAN 1: Look... Smith and Johnson are talking to the coach!

FAN 2: Looks as though they'll substitute!

TOGETHER: G.I.! G.I.!

(INTERPRETATION: The two fans thought that they were cheering the two substitutes). Those around them would be looking for a soldier dressed for combat.

BILL: Let's go to *Alfonso's* for supper tonight.

KEN: There? Ah, there are too many yuppies there.

(INTERPRETATION: Ken dislikes *Alfonso's* because the customers say "yup" to anything that's offered. The waiters, as a result, are completely exhausted from trying to keep the "yes" people's glasses full of water, menus in their hands, etc.) In fact, Ken probably dislikes the young,

pretentious atmosphere.

MARY: Hey, Phil's not here tonight. I wanted to dance with him.

LUCY: Oh... didn't you hear? Phil's up the river again.

(INTERPRETATION: Phil, in an act of intentional rebellion, refuses to come to the disco and is instead meditating in his room). The truth is that he is in a correctional facility.

The point is not to ridicule the students' investigative work here; to the contrary, it is *excellent*. The short dialogues serve only to show how different interpretations of a conversation can be when the key phrase has been misunderstood. In reverse, were I a learner of Japanese and had I typed in the *hiragana* for *shisha*, (for a messenger, 使者) I might accidentally- without knowing *kanji* characters- select the characters meaning *dead person* (死者). By selecting these characters, a sentence could be rendered senseless or totally different in meaning.

CORRECT ETYMOLOGIES

Naturally, the students were presented with both the correct meanings and etymologies for the terms/words above. For your peace of mind, here they are:

YANKEE- *Probably* from the derogatory term *Jan Kees* (John Cheese) with which Dutch sailors used to ridicule English counterparts. It was later used to refer to all British people, then somehow wound up as a designation for Americans. American southerners used it as a derogatory term for northerners; New Englanders today remain proud of the billing. In fact, they may be the only ones (aside from the baseball club) to be proud of the designation.

CAN YOU DIG IT?- *Dequ* (Nigerian, *to understand*) originated with slaves brought over from Africa. It came to mean, *Can you understand?* The hippy generation thereafter made it popular.

DODGERS- Before relocating to Los Angeles, the Dodgers were situated in Brooklyn, New York. The borough (one of five in New York) was full of streetcars; it was said that one would have to, before crossing an intersection, look both ways, behind and ahead, lest he be struck by an ambling tram. These *dodgers* had to get out of the way fast. These proud pedestrians lent their name to the baseball club. Strangely, Los Angeles- until two years ago- did not even have light rail in their city. More bizarre yet is the name of their basketball team, *the Lakers*. There are few fresh water bodies in that region, but if you recall that they came originally from Minneapolis (*minne* {Dakotan}, meaning water: *apolis* {Greek}, meaning city), then it makes sense.

THAT TAKES THE CAKE!- When poor black slaves in the South threw parties, they frequently included dance contests for which the top prize was a cake. The most outlandish, expressive, creative dance often won; hence, something extremely unusual takes place and *that takes the cake*, or, "Now I've heard everything!"

FLEA MARKET- Logic fails here. This has nothing to do with *nomi*, the insects. When New York City was occupied predominantly by the Dutch (original name: New Amsterdam), there was a large market called the *Vallie Markt* (Dutch for *Valley Market*). As in German, the "v" is

pronounced like an "f" in English. Over time, the *Vallie Markt* was shortened to the *Vlie Markt*. Market eventually came out of *Markt*, and as different nationalities poured into New York, the *vlie* came to be spelled as *flic...* or *flea*. Somehow, this stuck and spread right back through Europe.

POOR BOY SANDWICH- This bears different names depending on where one is in the United States: grinder, hoagie, hero, submarine. But in New Orleans, these meat and cheese sandwiches (on oblong loaves of bread) came to be called *poor boy sandwiches* because they were given to poor immigrants upon arriving in that port.

TO MAKE THINGS HUM- In early industrial America, New England boasted a good many factories that worked steadily and well. From a distance, they were said to "hum", or produce a "humming" sound. Their mechanics, reputedly the best in the land, could make these factories work again were they to break down. Hence, the phrase means to get the humming sound going again, or to be able to make things work well.

HE'S THE SPITTING IMAGE OF ...- Again, thanks to blacks in the South and their lyrical pronunciation, a new phrase was created: *He's the spirit and image of his father* became- when said quickly- *He's the spittin' image of his fathuh*. The changed phrase stuck.

TEXAS LEAGUER- In 1886, three players of small stature from the Texas league were called up to play in Syracuse, New York. They repeatedly got on base with short hits over the secondbaseman's glove, and Syracuse lost the game. The disgusted pitcher exclaimed, "We lost because of those dinky (tiny) little Texas leaguers!" The name stuck not with the men, but with their many hits to the same place.

THE BIG APPLE- New Orleans, not New York, was the original *manzana principal* (the main orchard, or the place where all the action takes place). When jazz became big in 1910, New Orleans was "the Big Apple". New York, later thinking itself to be the place where all the action occurred, "borrowed" the name.

GRINGO- A word in Spanish, *griego* (meaning "Greek") refers to a person who speaks incomprehensible Spanish. It is akin to, "It's Greek to me!", meaning something is not understandable to a person. When the "Yankee" invaders came from the north, their talk sounded like gibberish to the Mexicans, who quickly dubbed them *gringos*, or people who speak in an incomprehensible way.

NEWS- The Latin, *novus*, was brought into English as *newes* and eventually became "new". *News* is merely the plural of *new*, referring to events that have just happened. This etymology may be dull, but it is true.

G.I.- *Government Issue*. General Douglas MacArthur abhorred hearing this term applied to human beings. Goods for the military were all labeled, G.I.; men, he argued, should not be labelled as such. Despite his opposition, the initials stuck. In the First World War (called *the Great War* before World War II resulted in its renaming) the G.I.s were referred to as *doughboys*. These infantrymen, it was said, were so frightened to go into battle that their faces became pale white, or as white as dough. When one thinks about it, neither term is very flattering.

MIND YOUR P's AND Q's- Meaning "to watch yourself, to mind your manners", this came from one of two dichotomous places: either the barroom (where one had to watch pints and quarts) or the

schoolroom (where a lower case p could look like a q if written backwards). Personally, I prefer the latter explanation; Japanese students often mistake the b in my given name (Bob) for a d, so that they carelessly write Bod. In 1970's American slang, "What a bod!" meant that somebody had a shapely, attractive figure. In actuality, I am scrawny and physically unappealing, so I find this error a delight.

PIDGIN ENGLISH- This is the Opium War's version of *lingua franca*. Portuguese, British, Dutch traders (among others) carried on commercial activity with the Chinese in a hodge-podge language that could somehow be understood by all. It was not proper English, but a broken English used to conduct *business*. This word gave the Chinese great trouble in terms of pronunciation; therefore, *business English* was referred to commonly as *pidgin English*. While there are birds capable of enunciating words and sounds, a pidgeon has never been one of these.

Note that during the past few years, English has enriched itself further with additions. Not only terms like *perestroika* and *rollerblade*, but perhaps to *shink*, *a man*, and *genki* will work their way into overseas vocabularies as well. Consider the following utterance by a native English-speaking long-term resident of Japan: "*I can't get to the bank; I'm not feeling too genki. I need a man to shink to Kyoto. Could you lend it to me?*"

TRANSLATION: "I can't get to the bank. I'm not feeling very peppy. I need a ¥10,000 note to take the bullet train to Kyoto. Could you lend it to me?" Or, this one: "*Sensei and I will have uchiawasei in the kochoshitsu over cha for the ninensei lesson.*" Who could follow this English (?) sentence? The key words would be recognizable only to one with a knowledge of school terms in Japanese.

In this sense, English is evolving. A "dialect" of English is spawning new words that could conceivably stay for a long period of time... or even become a permanent part of the language.

DIALECT RECOGNITION

There are very few language detectives as proficient as Shaw's Henry Higgins (*Pygmalion*), who could pinpoint the origin of a Cockney flower girl by her accent and vocabulary. Still, language learners may be interested in being able to identify differences in pronunciation and usage. Consider the following lists:

LIST ONE	LIST TWO
y'all	duh
ay-RAB	tawk
po-LICE	wit
prezdet	awf
yo	bawl
po	d'ja

These are just two of many lists used in exercises to explain speech patterns in certain dialects. One is General Southern Lowland (or, the Deep South, as it is referred to); the other is King's (County) English, or a New York area dialect. Here are transcriptions into conventional English:

you all	the
Arab	talk
police	with
president	off
your	ball
poor	did you...

These words reflect not only differences in pronunciation between regional dialects and conventional English, but differences in usage. "Are y'all doin' OK?" asks a passerby to a friend he has not seen for some time. Why use "y'all" when speaking to one person? Southern etiquette dictates that by addressing a single person in the plural, the speaker is extending extreme politeness. In fact, the speaker is asking about the decoder's entire family by using *y'all* (you and *all* of your family).

Video can be of great use in preparing listening exercises. (See appendix 2, an excerpt from *To Kill a Mockingbird*). In this exercise, the listener tries to match sentences in standard English (written on the worksheet) to their counterparts in discourse context. For example, number 3 reads, "You seem to be very small." The line, as delivered in the text, is, "*You look right puny.*" With its drawn out diphthong, *raht* (right) *puny* means "very small". This habit of prefacing an adjective with "right" rather than "very" is common to Southern English.

In video excerpt two (see appendix 3, a passage from the contemporary film, *City Slickers*), a simple cloze test is presented in which the listener tries to decipher New York English by filling in blanks. Given the heavy syllabic emphasis on certain words and the tendency to make a string of five words sound like one, foreign language students often have difficulty with this passage.

CULTURAL LITERACY

Reading newspaper passages often goes beyond communicative or linguistic competence; it requires a skill known as *cultural literacy*. According to Hirsch, true literacy depends on a knowledge of the specific information that is taken for granted in society. It is defined as, "*the network of information that all competent readers possess.*"

John Hinds points out in his article on comparative composition styles across cultures that responsibility for comprehension can often lie more strongly with a reader depending upon the culture. This is considered to be more so in Eastern cultures (particularly Chinese). Passages presented in appendix 4, however, demonstrate that such a perplexity exists even in English. To understand this piece, one needs a fundamental knowledge of ancient history, modern history, economics, politics, music, geography... read through the sample and try to "crack" this article. The sentence structure and grammar used are not particularly difficult, but the writer assumes a certain knowledge, a certain level of achievement educationally on the part of the reader.

The writer assumes that the reader can recognize the following references:
Midas Touch- From Greek mythology. King Midas could turn anything he touched into gold. Therefore, this person had an extremely successful start in his career; everything he did worked out

well.

Red Carpet- A custom used in greeting dignitaries or persons of importance.

Iron Boot- Nobody wears such a heavy shoe. If a nation is under an iron boot, then it probably is being heavily controlled by a strong country.

Olive Branch- A symbol of peace, from the Bible. It was brought to show that the flood inflicted on the world was receding.

Tito- There are many "Titos" in the world. This does not refer to Michael Jackson's singing brother, Tito, but rather to the former leader of Yugoslavia, Josip Broz.

Two-sided Berlin Wall- Built to keep the West out (or perhaps its own population from fleeing), a two-sided Berlin Wall would be built to keep out *two* superpowers. It would hint at isolation.

Tango- A dance that requires cooperation.

Kremlin/White House- Instead of writing the USSR and the USA, the writer refers to them instead as one would to sports' teams. "The Kremlin vs. The White House" has the ring of a boxing announcer rather than a news commentator.

Geneva- One of the headquarters of the United Nations (in Switzerland, incidentally).

Henry David Thoreau- Naturalist, advocate of individual rights.

Jean Jacques Rousseau- An advocate of romanticism or enlightenment.

Mao- Chairman Mao Tse Tung of the People's Republic of China. He supported ongoing revolution.

Fidel- The first name of Fidel Castro, Cuban president. A fierce opponent of Western capitalism. (NOTE: As of this writing)

Crescendo- A musical term indicating increasing loudness.

World Bank- An institution that provides assistance to economically developing countries.

Comrade- A word meaning friend, but which has the nuance of two people in a communist-oriented state greeting one another.

For the astute student able to "decode" this article, the answer is Nicolae Ceausescu, former (executed) president of Romania. This is often how colorfully penned newspaper and magazine articles are written. Reading such examples helps prepare students for further work with periodicals.

CONCLUSION

Content-based teaching aims at the integration of academic content with second-language skills. Primarily, this unit aims not to develop future etymologists or linguists, but rather to serve three major objectives: 1. Deepen understanding of the language the students study; 2. Understand differences among different "types" of English; 3. Stimulate further interest in language itself. Furthermore, by teaching with language-based (content focused) units, it is hoped that students will make an easier transition to academic-based study should overseas schooling be a goal for the students. Such units aim to help students understand not merely words, phrases, and vocabulary, but aim to help students understand the social reality in which the language functions- as an

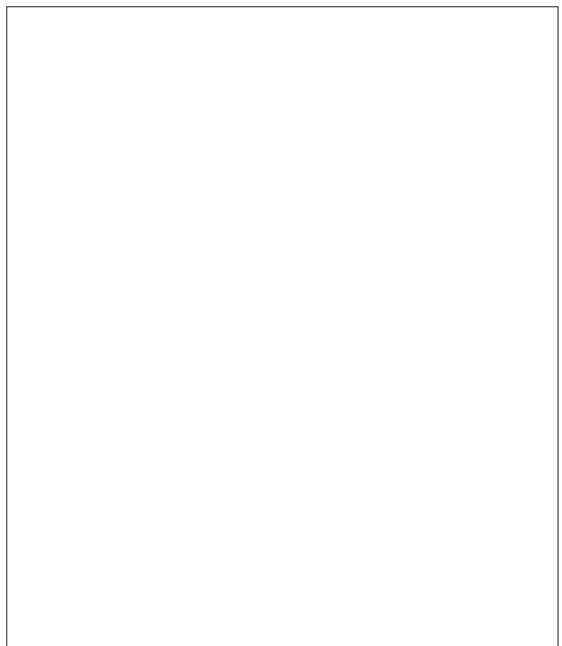
Appendix 1

(From *Eigo Kyoiku*, Kairyudo Publishing)



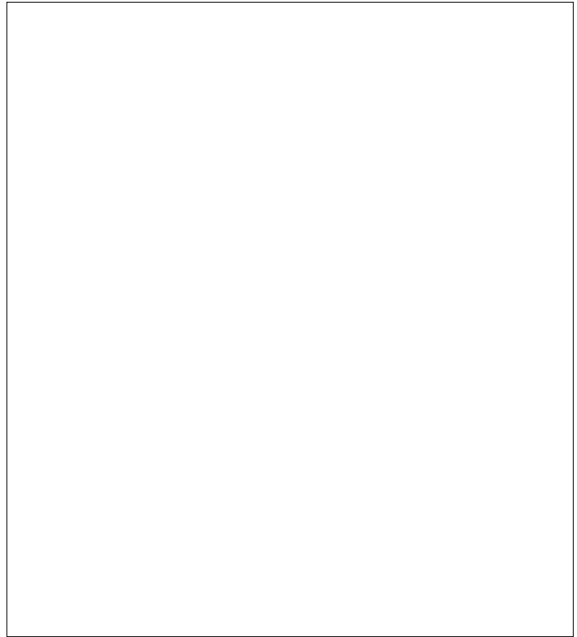
Appendix 2

(From *To Kill a Mockingbird*)



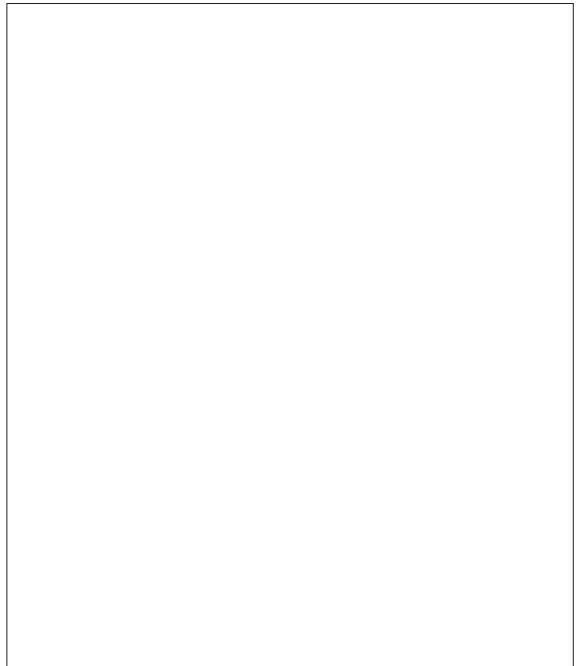
Appendix 3

(Cloze Test, adapted from *City Slickers*)



Appendix 4

(Cultural Literacy exercise)



inseparable medium of expression for a society.

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